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NEW BOOKS REVIEWED.

BY FREDERIC TABER COOPER, HAMILTON W. MABIE AND
CHRISTIAN GAUSS.

"THE BELOVED VAGABOND."*

To a certain uncritical type of mind, the most effective endorsement that can be given a new author is to measure him in terms of some standard writer, to call him a second Thackeray, a younger Dickens, a successor to Trollope. But there are to-day so many mediocrities content to flicker with a borrowed light, that one of the rarest and most welcome experiences is to come across a writer who does not obviously show the influence of any author later than the seventeenth century, a book that is not quite like any other book that we have ever read. Yet when this pleasant experience does occur, there is a temptation to be almost too lavish with one's praise. In the case of such a book as "*The Belovéd Vagabond*" it is not quite wise to give a free rein to one's appreciation.

To imply that Mr. Locke is, in the strict sense of the phrase, a new author, would be misleading. In such leisure hours as his duties as Secretary to the Royal Institute of British Architects leave him, he has produced during the past decade no less than ten novels, one of which, "*The Morals of Marcus Ordeyne*," has been dramatized and has proved to be one of the successes of the present London season. Of these ten books, there is not one that is actually mediocre, not one that is lacking in originality and promise. And yet it would have taken a critical acumen little short of inspiration to predict from the author of "*Derelicts*" and "*Idols*" a work of such fineness, such paradoxical humor, such whimsical tenderness, as "*The Belovéd*

* "*The Belovéd Vagabond.*" By William J. Locke. New York:
John Lane Co.

Vagabond." Considering how far he has moved forward, even from his excellent "Marcus Ordeyne" of a year ago, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that Mr. Locke has just begun to write.

The trouble hitherto seems to have been that Mr. Locke did not quite understand wherein his real strength lay. He squandered his energy upon plot construction, instead of fostering his unique gift for creating characters. It is true that he often idealizes his men and women, and yet they remain convincing because he makes them so wonderfully human in all the little every-day happenings that are yet so vital. It is in his plots that a latent vein of undisciplined romanticism now and again betrays itself. In real life, men and women do not immolate themselves upon the altars of love and friendship with quite such Quixotic rashness. Unlike Jimmie Padgate, in "Where Love Is," men do not publicly brand themselves cowards and seducers, in order to spare the women they love the knowledge of a rival's baseness; unlike Irene Merriam, in "Idols," women do not bear false witness to their own dishonor, even to save an innocent man from the gallows; unlike Paragot, in "The Belovéd Vagabond," accepted suitors in the real workaday world do not consent to abandon the woman they love, on the very night of their betrothal, pass out of her life without a word of explanation, and pledge their honor never to seek her again, even to spare her the shame of knowing that her father is a thief.

A distinction, however, may be drawn, largely in favor of "The Belovéd Vagabond." In his earlier volumes, Mr. Locke carefully held in reserve his most flagrant improbability for his dramatic climax. In his latest story, all unlikelihood of plot belongs to the vague, remote past; it is a sort of condition precedent, upon which the whole structure of the narrative rests, but it is nowhere deliberately flaunted in your face. Indeed, the precise details of a ten-year-old estrangement do not greatly matter. All that we really need to know is that somewhere in the background of the life of Mr. Locke's delectable Vagabond there is a Dream Lady, *aux petits pieds si adorés*; that for her sake he cut himself off from fame and fortune and love, and voluntarily became a nameless wanderer, a human derelict. Of the early years of his rovings, we receive nothing but a vague impression of strange, bizarre shifts of fortune; fugitive, tantalizing glimpses of him, now in Warsaw, leading a trained bear

through the streets; now in Prague, comfortably lodged with a professional burglar; and again in Verona, learning the trade of coffin-maker, and briskly driving home the nails, to the inspiring strains of "Funiculi, Funiculá." But it is not until much later, not until he adopts a wretched little London waif, whom he christens Asticot, that we begin to have a coherent chronicle of the wanderings of Berzélius Nibbidard Paragot.

To attempt to give at second hand an adequate idea of the whimsical charm of "The Belovéd Vagabond" is at best a disconcerting task. To call it odd, bizarre, unique, paradoxical, full of unexpected humor and irony, is still not to explain its peculiar appeal. It is something more than "a *picaresco* romance compared with which that of Gil Blas were the tale of wanderings around a village pump"; it is more even than the story of a man who lived for years in a hopeless dream, not guessing that happiness lay all the time within easy reach of his hand; it is a book full of nostalgia for wide spaces, breathing-room for body and for mind. If you have in you any germ of the "Wanderlust," any fugitive desire to throw off the trammels of convention, you must find a rare delight in "The Belovéd Vagabond."

And yet the book, like its title, remains essentially a paradox. Paragot is not merely a threadbare, penniless wanderer, living from hand to mouth, happy if only there are "two sous for bread and two to throw to a dog,"—but he has fallen into evil ways. He has lost something of the rudimentary sense of decency; his straggling hair is a stranger to comb and brush; his hands and nails are often in need of the simple ministrations of soap and water; his craving for the consolation that lurks in absinthe has grown upon him until it is a nightly problem whether he will be able to find his way unaided to bed. And yet, by the sheerest *tour de force*, you are made to overlook his lapses and irregularities. We see him always through the adoring eyes of the two companions of his wanderings,—Asticot, who chronicles their adventures, and Blanquette de Veau, the big, ungainly, slow-witted peasant girl, who gives him the dumb devotion of a dog.

Of course one knows almost from the beginning that this odd companionship, this bizarre Odyssey from one end of Europe to another, must come to an end; one foresees that sooner or later fate will relent and not only restore to Paragot his real name and station, but also give him back his lost Joanna, of the *petits*

pieds si adorés. Any writer less thoroughly an artist than Mr. Locke might here have blundered, not realizing that the change had come too late, that Paragot had lived too long in his vagabondage, had grown too intolerant of conventions ever to take up his old life again, even for the sake of a Dream Lady. Nothing in the book is more whimsically, more refreshingly real than the incongruity of Paragot in snug frock coat, wrinkling across his expansive chest; Paragot with gloves and umbrella; Paragot sedately accepting tea and cigarettes, in place of his accustomed absinthe and his pipe; Paragot revolting against the unbearable smugness of a little English village, and suddenly awakening to the painful knowledge that the real Joanna was no longer the Woman of the Dream.

Undoubtedly there are some readers who will quarrel with the final solution of the story, the solution that Asticot discovered, and that filled Paragot with undisguised amazement. "*Nom de Dieu!* but it is colossal, that idea! And I never thought of it, though it has been staring me in the face!" Yet the beauty of it is that it really solves everything, and transforms into a reasonable being one whose golden rule has hitherto been that "the man who lives according to reason has the heart of a sewing-machine." Listen to the embodied wisdom of the Belovéd Vagabond, after he had found the Reality of Things:

"I have found it, my son. It is a woman, strong and steadfast, who looks into your eyes; who can help a man to accomplish his destiny. The destiny of man is to work, and to beget strong children. And his reward is to have the light in the wife's eyes and the welcome of a child's voice as he crosses the threshold of his house."

There is many a novelist, much better known, who might well envy Mr. Locke the privilege of having written "The Belovéd Vagabond."

FREDERIC TABER COOPER.

"THE CAMBRIDGE APOSTLES."*

THOSE people who imagine that men of genius are always jealous, irritable, irresponsible in friendship and given to backbiting will find Mrs. Brookfield's entertaining reports and characterizations of "The Cambridge Apostles" corrective of traditional misconceptions. It is preeminently a record of ardent affec-

* "The Cambridge Apostles." By Frances M. Brookfield. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.